

AT FIRST SIGHT - LEVERAGING FAITH
A SERMON BASED ON ACTS 8:9-24
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2020
10:00 a.m.

Gift giving can be a bit of a minefield.

It shouldn't be.

A gift is something that should express our esteem, respect,

appreciation, gratitude, love, best wishes, affection, care, for another.

It should be a show of the heart,

a chance reveal our true feelings.

At least it could be.

But often, too often, it's a minefield.

But there is also the more transactional model of gift giving.

It is also a reveal of the heart.

If I want to get something good, I better give something good.

If I want my back scratched,

I better scratch theirs.

And so we reveal our world to be

more about favours and debts and payments and owing

rather than gifts.

Accounting skills become necessary

in the transactional model of giving,

in a world where you get what you pay for.

Sebastian Maniscalco is a comedian

who has a bit about gift giving at weddings.

He talks about 'the green book' in his culture.

In his world, you don't register for weddings.

You don't bring a toaster to a wedding.

You bring cash.

Sometimes you don't even need the wedding card.

Just the cash in an envelope with a post-it note.

He's pretty funny,

talking about those family and friends

who don't put the envelope into the box

until after the meal.

If the chicken is dry, pull a few bills out of the envelope.

Then, after the wedding, the couple and their family

bring out 'the green book'.

In the green book you record what was given.

It functions as a spreadsheet.

Keeping track.

Then, when you get invited to a wedding,

you are ready.

You get out the book.

The number you need is right there.

What did they give?

It was in the upper room, in Acts chapter 1 that Jesus said,

'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you;

and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem,

and in all Judea and Samaria,

and to the ends of the earth.'

You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes we can be so focussed on the gifts that the Holy Spirit

brings to us;

gifts like wisdom, faith, mercy, teaching, leadership, healing,

we can be so focused on the gifts of the Spirit,
that we forget that the Holy Spirit is the primary gift.

But gift giving can be a minefield.

And here in chapter 8, Simon steps on a mine.

Because Simon goes transactional in his faith.

As soon as your faith goes transactional, you are headed into a minefield.

The Holy Spirit had come upon those in the Upper Room
way back in chapter 2.

Tongues of fire rested on them,

they all began to speak in many different languages.

People from all around the world,

were hearing the good news about Jesus
in their own language.

They were both amazed and perplexed.

Some thought the group had been drinking.

Churchland has a little phrase called being drunk in the Spirit.

Not spirits. Spirit.

The saying comes from this occasion.

But despite the call and mandate to be witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea,
Samaria,

and the ends of the earth, given in chapter 2,
at the beginning of chapter 8, the church still hadn't left Jerusalem.

They had had some committee meetings.

They replaced the apostle Judas by straw vote.

They set up a board of seven deacons to manage widow care.

Two of those seven were Stephen and Philip.

But all of it was happening in Jerusalem.

The church hadn't moved outward yet.

Never mind ends of the earth, they were still in Jerusalem.

It was Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin in chapter 7

that got things moving.

He called out this 'supreme court' of the Jewish people,

finishing his speech with

'You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears!

You are just like your fathers.

You always resist the Holy Spirit!

Was there ever a prophet your fathers didn't persecute?

They even killed those who predicted the coming
of the Righteous One.
And now you too.'

The Sanhedrin executed Stephen.

He was a threat.

His execution meant it was open season on the church,
and the church scattered.

Philip went to Samaria.

It's important to understand a little bit about Samaria.

Samaria was right in between Judea in the south, where Jerusalem was,

and Galilee in the north,

where Jesus did the majority of his miracles and teaching.

In Old Testament times it had been the heart-land

of the northern kingdom.

When the Assyrians carried the leaders of the Northern Kingdom

into captivity, into exile,

foreigners were imported to take their place.

These foreigners intermarried with the poorer Israelites

who were left behind, and a mixed religion resulted.

You can read more about it in 2 Kings 17.

But this mixed religion, of people of mixed descent,
became know as Samaritans.

We had guests from Northern Ireland staying with us a few years ago.

They were young people in their early 20's.

Hearing their stories made me think that there are some parallels
in relationship between Jews and Samaritans.

In Ireland, you have Irish Unionists,

generally they are Protestant and part of northern Ireland,

loyal to the crown and wanting to continue as part of Great Britain.

You have Irish Nationalists,

generally they are Catholic and part of southern Ireland.

The distinctions and discriminations run deep,

right down to the brand of clothing you wear

being a sign of your identity.

I don't understand how this would come to be,

but the O'Neill brand of clothing is an issue.

I understand it to be something worn by California surfers
who made it cool.

But in Ireland, it is worn by Catholics, by nationalists,
for us, it is just a name brand,
but there, it is identity.

So much so that when one of these young women
who was visiting us, told us that when she
was wearing an O'Neill brand sweater
her uncle made her take it off in his house.
Not in my house.

Unionists and Nationalists, all Irish,

but don't cross into each other's territory.

Samaritans and Jews was a similar situation.

The gospel of John 4 explains
Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.'

That's part of the reason Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman at the well
is such a scandalous story.

And it was why for those who heard it,

the story of the good Samaritan was the sound of a dentist's drill
to Judeans and Galileans.

But following Steven's execution, Philip went to Samaria.

He proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God,

and the name of Jesus Christ,

and the Samaritans of all people, believed Philip's witness.

They believed Philip's message of Jesus over Simon's.

Simon was their local 'Holy Man'.

Simon practiced sorcery in the city.

He had some pretty good tricks,

good enough that he had taken on airs,

and boasted that he was someone very great.

Both high born and low born all gave him their attention.

He had even been given the title,

'The Great Power of God'

I'll tell you a Bible spoiler.

It never goes well for the one that sets himself or herself

up against, or above, or in opposition to, or instead
of God.

It's never a good idea to call yourself 'The Great Power of God'
in God's earshot, which is everywhere.

So there was Philip, in Samaria,
bringing Samaritans to a faith in Jesus.
They were baptized, men and women.
Samaritans of all people.

We are told that Simon believed and was baptized too.

And really, good on Simon.

We aren't told his motives.

As I was preparing,

I read from those that argued good motives for Simon.

I read from those that argued selfish motives for him.

Luke the author hasn't revealed Simon's motives.

But Luke has written that Simon believed.

I find it is very rarely helpful to try and guess another's motives.

It's too easy to be wrong.

Simon believed, was baptized and then followed Philip everywhere.

He was astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

The man who was known as 'The Great Power of God'

was astonished.

He was seeing the true power of God and it was well beyond his

and his sorcery.

The apostles back in Jerusalem heard that Samaria

had accepted the word of God.

So Peter and John, from the Republic of Ireland,

crossed over into Northern Ireland.

Peter and John went north to Samaria.

Interestingly, there was no talk

about why Samaritans couldn't accept Jesus.

There was no requirement made that Samaritans would have to stop

being Samaritans in order to follow Jesus.

There was no convening of the leaders to see if this was

going to be new policy and new direction.

Samaritans were welcomed to follow Jesus. Full stop.

Peter and John prayed for the new believers.

Prayed that they might received the Holy Spirit

which had yet to come upon them.

Peter and John placed their hands on the Samaritans,

and they received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Seeing this,

having seen Philip lead signs and miracles,

having seen the gift of the Holy Spirit rest on the Samaritans

Simon wanted in.

Again, who knows his motives.

It could be that he was calculating the value of something like this,

this ability to lay on hands and give the Holy Spirit.

He had been in the 'Great Power of God' business.

Maybe he knew this was the iPhone 11 in a flip phone world

and he wanted shares in the IPO,

in this initial public offering.

Maybe because he knew the value,

he wanted to show respect

for what Peter and John had on offer,
and pay his fair share to get into it,
rather than just get it for nothing.

Whatever he was thinking, hoping to get into God's green book
he made the offer of cash.

He offered Peter and John money and said,
'Give me this ability too, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands
may receive the Holy Spirit.'

Again, we don't know if he was kingdom minded,
wanting this ability to promote Christ,
or hoping to be the first franchise
or get in early in the pyramid scheme.

Regardless of motive. He stepped into the minefield
that is making faith transactional.

The post-resurrection, restored-by-Jesus Peter

is still the brash uneducated fisherman.

He had an answer for Simon's request.

The translators had to tone it down so it could be read in church.

Today we read,

‘May your money perish with you

because you thought you could buy the gift of God

with money.’

What does Peter say in the original?

If you promise to turn off your righteous indignation radar, I’ll tell you.

In the Greek, in the original language

Peter said to Simon,

‘To hell with you and your money.’

or alternatively,

‘You and your money can go to hell.’

I’m thinking pastoring wasn’t Peter’s spiritual gift.

Maybe exhortation.

So yeah, ‘ouch!’.

Peter keeps going at Simon.

‘You have no part or share in this ministry,

because your heart is not right before God.

Repent of this wickedness

and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you
for having such a thought in your heart.

For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.'

So, maybe Simon was a greedy charlatan

who wanted the Holy Spirit in order to make a buck
and was bitter than Philip had ruined his business.

But earlier we read that he believed and was baptized.

Maybe he just made a mistake

and misunderstood how God works,
and how God's kingdom works.

Maybe he had been trained by a world that says

"You can't get something for nothing."

Trained by a world which had made him cynical and bitter.

I mean really,

gift giving is a bit of a minefield right?

Why not track things in the book so you get the accounting right?

If God gives you a gift,

like his Son,

like salvation,

like his love,

in the transactional economy

of you do for me,

and I'll do for you,

you can understand Simon offering

what he saw as having value - money

in order to have shares in the Holy Spirit.

We do it too.

We speak the same language as Simon.

I'll give you a little extra for the upgrade God.

God does for me. I'll do for God. I did for God. God should do for me.

I gave to the church.

It should buy me a pass on tough times.

I was kind to a difficult person at work.

I should get a promotion in the good people hierarchy,

a jump ahead in the queue.

I did some work for a cause.

I spoke against an injustice.

I gave some money.

I forwarded or retweeted on social media.

I cleaned out some of my basement and gave it away.

I did all this,

I made a payment!

So bring me the upgrade,

bring me my share of the Holy Spirit,

and his special powers.

Simon from Samaria doesn't live that far away from us.

We speak the same language he does.

God, I give you this.

You give me this.

You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.

You do for me. I'll do for you.

Your faith, and your work for God, doesn't have to be this way.

Transactional gift giving in the kingdom of God, is a true landmine.

Simon got thrown into the air when he stepped on it.

To hell with you and your money.

Repent of this. Turn this around.

Your heart isn't right before God.

You need God's forgiveness for having this thought
in your heart.

This thought, that your interaction with God is transactional;
that your relationship with God is deals,
that God can be leveraged into action on your behalf,
your perception that the gift of the Holy Spirit
is a reward, or earned, or merited, or deserved, or bought,
with your money, your labour, or your time,
this kind of thinking means you have misunderstood God.
that your heart isn't right before God.

Simon asked for prayer.

Something was changing for the better in him.

He asked,

'Pray to the Lord for me,

so that nothing you have said may happen to me.'

The gift of God's Holy Spirit

indwelling you,

showing up in you

and revealing himself through your life,

comes so that through the power of the Holy Spirit,

you may give witness to Jesus,

that you may reveal Jesus to this world.

The Holy Spirit who is freely given without cost, as grace,

is given to you in the love and compassion and joy of God,

because God wants to be in close relationship with you.

You can't put a price on that.

You can't, and you don't buy or trade the gift of God's presence.

There is no green book.

You receive the gift of the Holy Spirit when

you open your heart to the Spirit of God,

and you let him in.

Pure gift.

Pure gift for the apostles,

Pure gift for Samaritans of all people,
and pure gift for you of all people.

The only leverage you have,
is the opening up of your heart.

Amen.